

We Do What We Can

by Cynamin

Category: Angel

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-06-08 08:00:00

Updated: 2000-06-08 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:46:27

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,934

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Being a vampire hunter is never easy work, especially when it's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys.

We Do What We Can

> <meta name="Author"> We Do What We Can: Prologue

## \*\*We Do What We Can\*\*

\*\*by Cynamin\*\*

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> <p><em>I began this story soon after I first heard rumors of the spin-off. This takes place soon after Angel and Cordelia have ended up in L.A.<em>

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> <div class="center"><em>Prologue<em>

\_"It was enough to just do what she could, and leave saving the world to the one who actually had the job."\_

\_~Amy Madison\_

\_The Gatekeeper Trilogy: Sons of Entropy\_

\_by Christopher Golden and Nancy Holder\_

\* \* \*

> <br>It's been so long since I last felt safe outdoors after dark. I do not remember the last time I was completely relaxed at night and looked at the stars. There are creatures out there at night, evil in the darkness. I know, I've seen them. I fight them. I'm a vampire hunter.

Yeah, I agree, it's an . . . unusual way to spend your evenings. It's also a sure way to shorten your life expectancy. And it's not exactly something you can write on your resume. "Robin Cunningham, Vampire Hunter. Call any time. Zombies - no extra charge." I don't usually admit my second career to anyone. I'm not a nutcase, I know what I've seen, I know what I've fought. But no one wants to believe in vampires. There was a time I denied the truth, too. That was shortly followed by the worst time in my life - I became a hunter with a death wish. Hunting vampires, death can be all too easy to find.

I'm a vampire hunter, and I have a story to tell you. I still fight the undead, but there is one crucial difference in my nights. I no longer wish to go down fighting. Instead, I fight to live.

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> <p>I'd sworn I was never going to return to L.A. Four years ago I'd lost everything I loved in this dark city. I'd sold everything that made up my identity and left to fight the undead elsewhere. Unfortunately, something in this city always seemed to draw me back. This time, it was money. There were difficulties with selling my parents' home. Probably because of the murders. So, the house was suddenly mine again, but I didn't want it. I was back in town whether I liked it or not, negotiating with a bank to take the house off my hands. Anytime I entered, all I could see was their blood.  
<p>

\_Sorry I missed you, pretty little thing. Next time.\_

I should have been paying more attention. I should have been prepared. And as the sun set, I should have realized my danger. Walking through the darkened streets back to my room, I saw nothing of my surroundings. It had been a horrible day. Forced to enter that house again, to assess it with some random uncaring bank employee. A small woman who didn't care at all that all I kept seeing was my parents' horrified faces, their glazed, unseeing eyes. Their blood --

\_Pretty little thing.\_

I wasn't aware of the sun setting as I walked. Wasn't aware of where I was at all. That is, until I heard footsteps behind me. I was suddenly alert and aware. Aware that the sun had gone down. Aware that I was wearing the worst possible outfit to fight in -- high heels and a tight skirt. Aware that I had only my two wooden knives on me. Aware that I was wearing my smallest cross.

There was an opening ahead on my right. It was dark -- perhaps an alley or a cut through to the next street. I didn't know who was following me, or even if I was truly being followed. My heart was loud in my chest. I slipped around the corner, slipped a knife out of my jacket sleeve, and waited in the dark.

I didn't have to wait long. He came around the corner, his disfigured vampiric face showing in the street lights. I clasped my knife in my hand, ready to stake the fiend's heart. Then he was joined by another . . . and another. Three vampires blocked my exit. Not my worst odds ever, I thought, I had a chance. Then I heard them behind me. Two more sets of footsteps. And a voice.

His voice.

"Well, who is this pretty little thing?"

It crawled like ice up my spine, freezing me in place. I knew what I'd see when I turned around: that voice and face would haunt my nightmares forever. The only difference I could see when I turned was that in my dreams his fangs and hands still dripped with my parents' blood.

There was another vampire behind him, cutting off my escape. I was trapped and frozen in fear. I gripped my wooden knife tightly in my hand, prepared to defend myself, to take as many of them with me as possible. As the vampires closed in, I struck. I whirled around to meet one of the vampires behind me. The strike was true, and he crumbled into dust. I struck again, wildly this time, and felt my weapon meet flesh - unfortunately of one's arm. He flung the piece of wood away. As I armed myself with a second blade and attempted to fight him off, I felt the others grab me. One vampire held each arm, and I knew I had lost.

The leader -- the one I knew, the murderer of my family -- circled around me like a prized possession. Flailing in my captors arms, I tried to reach him with my knife. Casually, he reached forward and snatched it from my fingers.

"Shame, pretty little thing," he said, and I cringed. "Is that anyway to greet one who loves you?" I tried to pull back from him, but his vampires held me tight. "I told you I'd come for you, didn't you get my message?" He reached out and caressed my cheek. "Didn't you get my presents? They were such works of art. For you. What can I say, you inspired me." He took another step and pulled me close to him. I know I whimpered as his mouth came close. "There's no Slayer here to rescue you now," he said, then came as close as possible and whispered in my ear. "I've waited so long to taste you," he whispered.

Then his fangs sank into my neck, and I cried out. The pain was intense. My vision was blurring, darkening. I was dying, draining away. It took forever, yet was only an instant.

Suddenly, I heard an impact at close range, and was released as the vampire on my right exploded to dust. The leader stopped his feeding to look up in surprise. Then I fell to the ground as the vampire to my left was destroyed. The leader snarled and moved out of my field of vision.

Barely clinging to consciousness, I heard the vampires' footsteps fleeing the area. Then in their wake came another set of footsteps, slow and calm, moving towards me. He came into the light where I could see him -- a dark haired vampire carrying a crossbow. Then, as he looked at me and his face changed to a handsome human facade, I

fainted, and the world spiraled into darkness.

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> <div class="center"><em>Part One<em>

I ached like a person who had run a marathon and my neck felt like it was on fire. Fatigue like I'd never felt before threatened to pull me back into the realm of sleep, but I was alive. That was one thing I really wasn't expecting. When the vampires had left me in the alley I had thought it was to be a case of "out of the frying pan and into the fire," or that I had been saved from one group of vampires to be another one's dinner.

Instead, I awoke to see a young, dark haired woman leaning over me, cleaning a scrape on my forehead that I did not remember getting. She looked at me for a moment, then said, "Good, you're awake."

I knew she wasn't a vampire. Over time I've become able to recognize the undead if I see them face to face, even if they're pretending to be human. I don't know how I do it, exactly. It's just a lot of little things that add up to that answer in a moment. The too pale skin of one who has not seen sunlight in years, the lack of the little movements of life, the cold, empty eyes that showed the demon within. . . . I'm not sure exactly how I know.

I stared at the young woman with an expression I knew was filled with confusion. She was only a couple of years younger than myself and seemed very certain of herself. What I found myself wondering was how much she knew - and how much I should say - about what had happened. About vampires. There was nothing here to tell me what was going on, or what was going to happen to me. Was I in the hands of friends or enemies? Sadly, I must admit that I had come to expect the worst, and so I came to look at my caretaker with suspicion.

"Where am I?" I asked. "How did I get here?" This could not be her home; the surroundings I could see were far too masculine.

She shuffled through a first aid kit while she thought on her answer. "A . . . a friend brought you," she said finally, though her tone of voice suggested that she had more thoughts on the subject that she chose not to voice. "So," she said, facing me again, "what's your name?"

I stared at her for a moment before answering. "Robin Cunningham," I said briefly, unwilling to reveal any more information.

"I'm Cordelia Chase," she said in return. Then, as she reached for some bandages, "I hope you appreciate this. I'm missing classes to take care of you," she said, a touch hotly.

When I simply stared at her and said nothing, she shrugged. "I need to redo the bandage on your neck," she said.

I moved my head just enough so that she could take care of my vampire bite but I could still see some of what she was doing. She carefully removed the bandage that was already there, then began to wash the wound with a damp towel. It stung like crazy and caused me to jump from where I was lying.

"Easy, easy," Cordelia muttered, putting a hand on my shoulder and forcing me to lie down again.

"What is on that!" I demanded as my neck continued to throb.

She began to bandage my neck again as she replied, "Just some antibiotics to kill those pesky germs. Plus a touch of holy water to get rid of any vampire stuff." I guess that answered my unspoken question as to whether or not she knew about vampires. She sat back and grinned. "Congratulations. You're officially my first living patient. Still, you lost a lot of blood, so don't try going anywhere."

\_Was that a threat?\_

There was a silence that permeated the room as Cordelia waited for me to make some response. I saw no reason to make one. She looked annoyed then but said nothing as she reached for an object on the table. It was one of my knives, and for a moment I feared for my life again. She merely looked at it, however, then handed it to me.

"Now," she said, "looking at your knives - and, by the way, we retrieved both of them - I'd guess you were prepared to fight vampires. I'd also guess you would do pretty well against one in a fair fight. But vampires aren't exactly known for fair fights." She regarded me seriously and continued, "You were lucky to get rescued. That fight was less fair than most."

I knew what she was fishing for. She wanted to know what I knew - if I fought vampires regularly and if so why. What I knew about the group that attacked me. I still didn't trust her, however, and so I only continued to look at her in silence. Besides, I was feeling the effects of my fight, and I knew I would soon be asleep again whether I wanted to or not. The expression on her face told me she was becoming exasperated with my silence.

This time the quiet was broken by the sound of a door opening. I couldn't see the door from where I lay, but I guessed it was to a bedroom. I hadn't been aware of anyone else in the apartment. Also, unless my sense of time was really off, it was afternoon. Well, I'd had a nocturnal day or two in my life. But, still, I didn't like not knowing these people who seemed to have rescued me.

I could hear the soft footsteps of whoever had opened the door. Cordelia looked up when she heard the person enter. "You're up early," she said with a frown. "For you, that is."

"How's the girl?" came a male voice in response.

"Frustrating, and about as responsive as a wall, but alive."

The man walked around the couch, slowly coming into view. First I could only see that he was probably tall - it was hard to tell lying down - and he was dressed in nearly all black, or at least very dark colors. Then he looked at me, and I could see his face clearly.

My first thought was that he looked slightly familiar. Then, a horrible surprise, I realized that he was a vampire. Was that why he

looked familiar, just the recognition of what he was? The too pale skin, the stillness of the dead . . . . I gripped the knife that Cordelia had returned to me tightly in one hand. By God, if I was going to be a meal after all this I was going to give him a fight he'd never expect. I may have been weakened, but all it took was a lucky shot in the heart.

The vampire merely looked at me, and for a moment I caught a baffling glimpse of pain and sadness reflected in his eyes. Then he looked at Cordelia and said, "I need to talk to you when you're done." Then he walked away.

While Cordelia was distracted watching him, I struggled to get up, still clutching the knife. No way was I staying here. The movement caught her attention, however, and she shoved me back down on the couch. "No way!" she said. "Angel did not rescue you just so you could run off and get killed in this condition."

"Angel?" Was that the demon's name? It was like a really bad joke. His face tickled my memory - I saw him now as the vampire who had indeed rescued me.

"Yeah," said Cordelia, "the guy you were just looking at like he had crawled out of a sewer."

I felt slightly abashed for that, then thought it odd that I felt so. After all, he was a vampire! But I couldn't ignore the hurt in his eyes when I looked at him like that.

Suddenly I yawned, and sleep threatened to claim me again. Cordelia stood up. "Get some rest and recover," she said, walking away. I clutched my knife fiercely as I nodded off, wondering again as sleep came where I was and who I was with.

\_A vampire with human eyes.\_

\* \* \*

> <p>"You don't trust us." <p>

Cordelia sat beside the bed, watching me. Her words greeted me as I awoke, and I regarded her with a frown. "Is there any reason I should?" I replied.

"Well, yeah!" she declared. "After all, we did save your life. What, you \_wanted\_ to be vampire food?"

"How do I know your \_friend's\_ not just saving me for a late night snack?!" I replied testily. I hate having my emotions questioned.

"I . . . Angel would never-" she sputtered for a moment in anger. "He rescued you! Brought you here and kept me up all night to take care of you! I can't believe you!"

It took her a moment, but she calmed down. "You're not going to help us, are you?" she said.

"I think that's a no," I replied sarcastically.

Cordelia stood up then and glared at me. "Fine," she said, "you can leave as soon as you're able. No one's stopping you. But if you did something to make five vampires go after you at once, they're not just going to leave you alone. So go." She walked away, then turned for a moment at the door. "God, you must have a death wish."

I watched her walk out the door and couldn't help but think she could be right. I lay for a while in thought. This was a different room than the one I'd fallen asleep in, I realized after a moment. Where before I'd been lying none too comfortably on the couch, it appeared I had been moved to the bedroom while I slept. It disturbed me that I had not woken up.

Slowly I sat up so that I might better look at my surroundings. This was not Cordelia's room - I'd gotten the impression that she did not live here. Then there was the vampire. I'd seen no one else here, so I could only conclude that this was his - Angel's - room. It made me more than a bit uncomfortable to realize that. Though why that made me any more uncomfortable than staying in the vampire's home, I don't know.

Perhaps it was just that all this confused me. I didn't know who to trust. I was still alive, that's what confused me. Even staying in the same house as a vampire, I was still alive. So was Cordelia, who seemed very human, and very familiar with Angel. And then there was Angel, a vampire, whose very human, emotional eyes had haunted my sleep. This room was like that, a contradiction. If I didn't know better I would have thought a normal person lived here. From the books on the shelves to the letters kept in a box, everything was normal. But there were no mirrors in the room, and it somehow felt un-lived in, like a place where someone didn't expect to stay for long. Sure, there were mementos to the past and places seen, photographs and artwork. Then by the bed, on the nightstand, a framed sketch of a girl's face.

I took a second look. I'd seen this girl before! It was long ago, really, but the memory was so clear and the drawing so accurate that there was no mistaking it.

Perhaps I should back up for a moment and explain where I'd seen the girl before. It was four years ago, just before my parents were murdered. I was walking home from a friend's house late at night when a man on the street asked me for directions. When I got close, his face changed. . . . He was the first vampire I ever encountered. He was also almost the last. I was rescued then by this girl, who fought the vampire until he ran away. She then told me to go home before departing in her own direction.

This picture . . . this was that girl. Okay, young woman; she wasn't that much younger than myself. I picked up the picture and looked at it closer. It was quite incredible, amazingly lifelike. She was smiling slightly with a sparkle in her eyes, and I knew there was no way it could have been posed.. No, this was drawn from memory by someone very familiar with the subject. It was unsigned, but by its placement in the room I could guess who'd drawn it.

And in some ways that only confused me more. There was something in the placement of the picture and the portrayal of the subject that spoke of . . . love. It just didn't match with any other vampire I'd ever met . . . and fought. Though I tried not to, I could feel my

suspensions and misgivings weakening. My antagonistic emotions were fading into a state of confusion. Then, slowly, a desire to know my rescuers better, and a nagging sense of debt that baffled me.

I could hear the two of them talking in the other room. Not loud enough for me to hear what they were saying, but talking just the same. I assumed that it was evening now, but there was no way for me to check. Rising from the bed, for a moment I thought to check how I looked before leaving the room. Again, the lack of mirrors in the room reminded me of where I was, as if I could forget. Running my hands quickly through my hair, I made my way slowly and unsteadily to the door.

A dizzy spell caught me suddenly and I cursed, hanging on to the door frame for dear life. Blood loss is a bitch, let me tell you. Still, as the dizziness faded, I had the opportunity to listen to the conversation. I wasn't too surprised that they were talking about me.

Angel spoke first. "I don't think she trusts anyone," he said softly.

"Yeah, well, she can trust us if she wanted to!" Cordelia replied quickly. "If there was just some way we could make her trust us--"

"We can't. No one can force trust."

A long pause, then the young woman spoke again. "I know," she said with a sigh. "I just . . ."

"Worry? Me too." There was another silence, and I listened closely. "Pierce is a relatively young vampire, just starting to gain control of some of this area's undead. Not that powerful yet, but he could be."

"Like a vampire gang leader," Cordelia interrupted.

"Right. And like a gang leader trying to get control, he's not going to waste his people without reason. There's more going on here than we know, and I don't think our guest is going to tell us anything."

Perhaps I would. I owed them that much. "Call it our own private war," I said from the doorway.

Cordelia turned around and looked at me, startled, as I made my way into the room. In contrast, Angel's eyes only widened slightly, then he rose from his chair and gestured for me to sit. To my relief he made no move to help me, instead standing back to lean against the wall. I sat with a small sigh while both of them watched me expectantly.

It was Angel who finally spoke. "What started it?" he asked.

"I cheated him out of a meal," I said. As they both waited for me to elaborate, I explained. "Actually, the girl in your picture cheated him out of a meal, and the meal was me." The vampire looked at me in surprise, but said nothing as he waited for me to continue. It was difficult, but I had to say it. "Three . . . days later, he . . ."

killed my parents. We've been after each other ever since."

The room echoed with silence, and they both regarded me sadly. I ignored the looks in their eyes; they'd already saved my life, I didn't think I needed their pity as well. I looked away to collect my thoughts and emotions.

Finally Angel spoke again. "Obsession," he said in understanding and a hint of sadness.

Cordelia looked at him in surprise.

I smiled bitterly. "Indeed."  
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> <div class="center"><em>Part Two<em>

Two days later I was back in the L.A. streets, but this time I was not alone. The two day gap had served two purposes; the first was to recover my strength from Pierce's attack. I felt fine eventually, but I still have a scar on my neck. The second reason was to form a plan of attack.

Now, I must explain that I had never "planned" an attack before this. My close brush with death and two days convalescence forced me to look at my prior actions, and I didn't like what I saw. Ever since my parents had died, I'd been merely reacting to everything around me. I didn't plan - I never planned. I saw a vampire, I killed it. Simple, end of story. I didn't have any goals beyond that. The last two days had thrown my world all out of balance.

For two days I had spent my entire time with two people who killed vampires just as I did. That's where the comparison ended, though. They sought to make lives better; they sought to get rid of all sorts of evil. Me? Well, I just killed vampires, plain and simple. What set myself apart more, though, was that they had lives beyond demon killing. Well, at least Cordelia did. I'm not sure how much of a life the undead can have. But Cordelia had dreams - she wanted to be an actress. Fighting evil was just a sideline.

I had stopped dreaming the night I found my parents dead. I had taken what money I could and learned to fight back. I didn't kill vampires for the betterment of the world. I had no higher cause than revenge.

So, two night after I was attacked by Pierce, four years after he had killed my parents, I was finally striking back. I can't quite explain how I felt about that. I was closing a chapter of my life, and I didn't know if I was glad or not. I didn't know where I was going from here. Though I did not admit it, deep down I was afraid of Pierce. He literally held my life in his hands. At the same time, I had come to a realization - one way or another, it was time for this stand off to come to an end.

I leaned against the hood of Angel's car, looking seriously into the shadows of the alley where I had been attacked. While I had been unconscious, he had tracked my attackers to their home. Now I had returned with him to the alley, perilously close to their lair. It

was early, and I awaited Pierce to emerge to feed.

I was not yet well enough for my wooden knives to be a smart weapons choice. Instead, I carried the same crossbow that Angel had used to rescue me. He carried simple wooden stakes instead, leaving the task of killing Pierce in my hands. It was quite the measure of Angel's trust in me that he stood beside me as I held the weapon ready. It was the measure of my self control that I hadn't used it on the nearest vampire.

If Angel was aware of what I was going through, he gave no sign. He must have been aware of it, just as he knew some of the confusion I'd been going through in the past few days. As we stood at the mouth of the alley, he looked at me, no doubt watching the conflicting emotions on my face. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I sought for the words to explain my feelings. I knew he wasn't referring to the thoughts on good vampires versus bad vampires, but on my ambivalent feelings towards the coming fight. I sighed as I collected my thoughts. "It's just . . . assuming I live through this-

He shook his head, interrupting me. "You'll survive the night," he said succinctly.

"Right," I said, not really believing. "When tonight is over, what am I going to do?"

"What do you want to do?" the vampire asked in response.

I sighed again. "I don't know. I never thought beyond repaying those vampires for my parents' death. I have no clue what I want to do with my life."

We were silent for a moment. "Do you want my advice?" he asked.

I wasn't sure I really wanted to get advice from a vampire, but he'd been nice to me and the least I could do was return the favor. "Go ahead."

"Live," he said briefly.

I looked at Angel curiously.

"From what you've said, you've been fighting vampires for years. But when you started fighting, you stopped living. Maybe it's time you remembered to live."

For a moment I said nothing in response. "I'm not going to stop fighting," I said flatly.

"I didn't say you should. I just meant you should find something to live for at the same time."

No more words were exchanged for several long minutes. I had a lot to think about, but I was finally getting somewhere.

After a moment, I got tired of deep thoughts. Now was not the time. Instead, fingering the crossbow, my mind went back to something else that had been bothering me. It was a minor crisis in comparison, but

if I didn't take care of it now I'd be asking myself the same questions every time I faced a vampire in the future.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I said after a moment. I was hesitant to bring the subject up. The two days had seemed to demonstrate that I could trust Angel, but he was still a vampire.

"Go ahead," he said without a pause.

It took me a moment to put the words together to ask. "Um, you're . . . not like other vampires," I said. "That wasn't a question, it's pretty obvious."

Angel nodded, a small smile on his face. "Alright, that's true. So what's your question?"

"Are there any other . . . vampires like you?"

"No. Not that I know of."

"Could there be?"

Angel was silent for a moment. "I suppose there could be, but it's unlikely. The . . . magics responsible for the way I am have been nearly lost." He was silent for a moment. "Why do you ask?"

I sighed. "You know I've fought vampires for a couple of years now. I . . . would have fought you, too, if you hadn't rescued me." It was harder to get out the question now, because I was afraid of the answer. "How do I know . . . other vampires I meet . . ."

I couldn't finish my question, but Angel understood. "Can I ask you a question?" he said into the silence.

"Alright," I replied reluctantly.

"The vampires that you've killed, how did you find them?" When I did not reply immediately, he continued. "Every one of them attacked you or someone else that you saw, correct?"

I didn't say anything for a long moment. I was astonished. What he was saying . . . I didn't need to worry about the vampires I'd killed, for everyone had been in the process of committing a murder. Slowly I smiled. Angel saw the realization I had come to and nodded briefly. We continued to wait in silence.

Another fifteen minutes passed, and the very last of the light disappeared from the sky. I began to fidget. Like I said before, I'm not one for planning.

"Shouldn't they have woken up by now?" I asked impatiently.

For a long moment he said nothing in response. Then, "Something's wrong," he whispered.

"Great," I muttered angrily, under my breath.

The good vampire glanced at me sharply. "Stay here," he commanded, then headed into the alley. Within a couple of steps he had

disappeared into the shadows. Is shivered - unnerving!

The silence after he left me disquieted me more than I expected. I'd spent a lot of time alone, but after two days I discovered that I missed company. Plus, my close brush with death had reminded me of just how vulnerable I was. This is where I'd been attacked, where my mortality had been proven. It seemed that the darkness and the silence pressed about me. For the first time in a while, I was scared.

The silence did not last. It would have been better if it had. Sounds of several people fighting broke the silence, and I jumped in surprise. I didn't know how many vampires Angel could ace and win, but something told me he'd encountered more than he could handle. Ignoring his directions to stay behind, I entered the alley, crossbow in hand.

I moved slowly, cautiously, but the alley was not that big. By the sounds of fighting I knew I would be on top of the battle any moment. Then another sound startled me - a figure's steps from behind me. I whirled, crossbow held ready, and stared horror in the face.

As much as the purpose of this evening was to finally confront Pierce and end our stand off, I was unprepared for the reality. There he stood, right in front of me, his demonic visage sneering at me. He chuckled, dark and cold. I froze.

"Well," the murderer mocked, "look what wandered back here. Thought you'd be long gone by now, pretty thing."

My jaw was clenched. My mind could find no response.

He laughed slightly. "We were ready for your 'friend,'" he sneered, "but you are an unexpected pleasure."

I listened to the fighting behind me. It had grown louder - closer, I assumed - but had not lessened. If anyone was going to rescue me, it would have to be myself.

"I've waited a long time for you," Pierce said, stepping towards me.

I almost took a step backwards, but a loud crash behind me stopped my retreat. The vampire took another step forward. "Don't," I forced from between clenched teeth.

"What?" he mocked, taking another step.

My hands tightened around the crossbow. In my fear I had forgotten I carried it. It gave me new strength. "Don't come any closer," I proclaimed.

He stopped for a moment. "You'll never fire," he said with certainty. "A moment longer, and we will be together forever."

Everything seemed to freeze around me, or at least slow down. I never - *\*never\** - would become a vampire. Pierce walked towards me, one slow step at a time. Agonizingly slow. The sounds of the fight behind me seemed to disappear. There was nothing, nothing at all, but Pierce, me . . .

. . . and the crossbow I carried.

The crossbow bolt could not have missed. It flew straight and true, piercing the vampire's heart. He stared at me in shock, then exploded into dust.

And my world returned to normal.

For a moment I stood in shock. I breathed in relief, staring at where my enemy had stood only moments before. The slight breeze had already scattered his remains. It was over, really over.

The sounds of fighting stopped abruptly behind me. In their wake came the sound of a vampire running away from the scene. I could only assume that he'd seen his leader destroyed and given up all further battle. Silence descended once again on the darkened alley.

I was still staring straight ahead, crossbow steady, when a hand touched my shoulder a moment later. Turning, I saw Angel looking at me, an unreadable expression on his face. With a long sigh I lowered the crossbow.

"It's over," he said.

I closed my eyes. Yes, it was finally over.  
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\_Epilogue\_

I don't go on trips down memory lane like this often. Partially because so much of that past is unhappy. But this group of experiences was a real turning point in my life, so looking back it's tinged with happiness. Maybe that's partially because the events that followed changed my attitude.

When Angel first gave me his advice, "live," I scoffed at it, partially because of it's source. Still, when I left a day later that advice was still in my mind. Having defeated my personal enemy, it was truly a new beginning for me. I could not go back to how I was, flitting from town to town and living off my inheritance. With Pierce gone, I found myself looking at L.A. in a whole new light - the light of day. In all my wanderings I had never found a place where I felt more at home than in the city where I grew up.

Within a couple of days I had moved back into my parents' house. Almost before I'd really thought about it I'd settled down again, stopped wandering aimlessly, and bought a small restaurant with the last of my parents' money. Did I mention that I've always loved food and cooking? No, I guess I didn't. Other things on my mind today than food. Like vampires.

Yeah, vampires. I still fight them, by the way. Knowing about them, I just couldn't stop. I don't do much anymore, but I do what I can.

In some ways I guess I should thank the vampires. It's because of them that I met my husband. Not that I'm glad that he was attacked . . . I don't wish that on anyone. But that's how I met John. And that is a story for another time.

It's been almost a year since I killed Pierce finally in that alley. I'm happy to say that things have changed for the better in my life. John and I have been married for nearly two months. For the first time since Pierce killed my family and the hunt began, I am happy.

I saw Angel again tonight. That's what got me thinking about these events almost a year past. I've changed since we last fought side by side, and I think he was happy to see that. Well, as happy as he ever seems about anything - he needs to lighten up a bit. I don't see the good vampire very often, but we bump into each other now and then. He was on his way out of town this time, vacation I guess. Said he's going back to Sunnydale, going to check on old friends. Best of luck, I suppose.

I think I'll put in a little extra vampire hunting time this week. There are plenty of scary things in L.A. for every hero I've met and more. And I'm sure there are more, human or whatever who fight in the darkness. There have to be. When I go out to find vampires this week, John will come with me. I'm glad for the company. We don't have super-powers or anything, but I guess we're all heroes in our own way. We do what we can.

End  
file.